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Fort Lewis Strykers could head for Baghdad

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Stryker brigade troops from Fort Lewis could have a role in new U.S. plans to bolster forces in Baghdad.

More than 3,000 soldiers from the Fort Lewis-based 3rd Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division are poised to take over for an Alaskan Stryker brigade that's supposed to be coming home after a year in and around Mosul, the largest city in northern Iraq.

But military commanders are reportedly considering extending the deployment of that Alaska-based 172nd Brigade Combat Team as part of the developing effort to bring stability to Baghdad.

That could mean Alaskan Strykers are sent to Baghdad while Fort Lewis troops operate around Mosul. The Alaskan unit might also continue to work security in northern Iraq to free up some incoming Fort Lewis units for Baghdad.

The New York Times reported Wednesday that the additional forces in Baghdad will include units equipped with Stryker armored vehicles. The Alaska and Fort Lewis-based brigades are the only Stryker units in Iraq.

But military officials said it has not been decided which troops will be sent to the strife-torn capital city.

"We are not commenting on any force movement in Baghdad," said Sgt. Jeremy Pitcher, a coalition spokesman in Baghdad.

Maj. Bob Bennett, the rear detachment commander for 3rd Brigade at Fort Lewis, said he didn't know of any plans to shift the unit's deployment from Mosul to Baghdad. Bennett said work continues on making the security transition in Mosul, which is about 225 miles northwest of the capital.

The Fort Lewis brigade has spent months sending supplies to northern Iraq in preparation for its planned yearlong deployment there.

Bennett said it would be logistically difficult to reroute the whole brigade. There is the possibility, though, that a portion of the brigade could be attached to a larger Baghdad task force.

It would not be the first time locally based Stryker units have peeled off hundreds of soldiers to help in other hot spots. The first time the 3rd Brigade went to Mosul, in 2003 and 2004, it sent a battalion to provide convoy escort during a Shiite uprising in southern and central Iraq.

And Fort Lewis' second group of Strykers -- the 1st Brigade, 25th Infantry Division -- sent a battalion to Fallujah soon after arriving in the fall of 2004.

Stryker commanders have always taken pride in their units' speed and mobility. The 21-ton, eight-wheeled armored carrier can move more smoothly in a cramped urban environment than a tracked vehicle like an M-1 tank or a Bradley Fighting Vehicle.

Mosul, meanwhile, has seen less sectarian violence than Baghdad this year and might be viewed as a city that requires less attention.

Col. Michael Shields, commander of the Alaska brigade, said in a briefing last week that Iraq forces might be ready to take over control of Mosul and Ninevah province by early winter or next spring.

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